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Robert Eckley

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Illinois Wesleyan University

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Nathanial Strauss: Just to start, kind of as a way to catalogue it, I'm the interviewer and I am sitting here with Robert Eckley who was the past president of Illinois Wesleyan University and we're at his home in Bloomington, Illinois on July 31st, 2009. Okay, so you became the president in 1968?

Dr. Eckley: Right

Strauss: Correct. And before that you worked at Caterpillar in Peoria?

Eckley: I was head of the Business Economics Department at Caterpillar.

Strauss: And so were you approached by Wesleyan to become the president or is it something you applied for?

Eckley: I was approached.

Strauss: Okay, and I mean what were your impressions of that proposal ? Were you interested ?

Eckley: We got together on two occasions and I made the decision to accept their invitation.

Strauss: What was it that drew you to Wesleyan at first? Like what appealed about Wesleyan to you?

Eckley: I think the fact that it was a good liberal arts college with the potential of becoming distinguished.

Strauss: And so when you first got to Wesleyan you kind of had a vision in mind for what you wanted it to become?

Eckley: As I became acquainted with it, I thought that it was possible to improve its quality. It had a good student body and we needed to upgrade the faculty somewhat and we certainly needed to build an endowment.

Strauss: Mhmm

Eckley: We started out with a little less than \$7million and in 18 years we had a sevenfold increase to roughly \$50million.

Strauss: Wow. And your background was originally in economics and business, correct?

Eckley: Right. My background is in economics.

Strauss: So that must have helped you.

Eckley: I had been in business fourteen years with Caterpillar. Prior to that I had taught at Harvard and the University of Kansas. I was also Senior Industrial Economist at the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City.

Strauss: Okay. Yeah, I actually went to the University of Kansas my freshman year.

Eckley: Oh, did you?

Strauss: So, good old Lawrence, Kansas.

Eckley: Right. I was there just two years and then I moved to the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.

Strauss: Okay. Would you say that your background in economics and business really helped you when you got to Wesleyan, helped you build the endowment and helped you kind of create an identity for Wesleyan?

Eckley: I think so. We were a bit oriented toward the church and not well enough established with the business community. So it was a matter of gaining more participation with business and with professional people on the Board of Trustees. We tried to upgrade the institution in a number of directions. We also needed faculty improvement which took a while.

Strauss: Mhmm.

Eckley: And the same thing was true economically to build an endowment. It takes a while because you need to plant a lot of seeds, sew them; they spring up, and produce. That does not happen quickly.

Strauss: Sure, kind of to prepare for this interview. I was reading old editions of the Argus. I found a quote that had you comparing Wesleyan to places like Carlton, Lawrence and Oberlin and saying that Wesleyan really wasn't up to their standard at that time.

Eckley: Right

Strauss: I was wondering, what were some of the initiatives you took to bring Wesleyan up to that new standard?

Eckley: Well, 50% of the liberal arts faculty had doctorates when I came and by 1980 we were up to 80%. I started recruiting myself during the first two years. I went to the University of Chicago, Northwestern, Michigan, various places particularly in the Midwest. I did ultimately go to Harvard, Columbia, other places. It was a matter of trying to get ourselves tuned into various graduate departments. For example, a couple of

the senior faculty now—Young in history and Bray in English were interviewed and came here.

Strauss: Yeah, I had Dr. Bray

Eckley: Actually I interviewed every faculty member who came aboard in the 18 years I was here.

Strauss: Oh, okay. So you personally would interview them and see if they were someone you would want on the faculty.

Eckley: Right

Strauss: Okay. When you first came to campus, the relationship between the students and the administration was changing pretty radically at that time, wasn't it?

Eckley: It was, but we really had no basic problems. As my colleague at Illinois State University said, "The difference between your place and mine is that you know your students." We did not have 20,000 students. That made the big difference.

Strauss: Laughs

Eckley: But it was a period of unrest in the entire student community throughout the country. Some thought they were going to cause a revolution. We did have students marching on the court house with the ISU group. When they saw the police and sheriff's patrol with big clubs and helmets, they decided to come back.

Strauss: So, obviously at the time, there was political unrest due to the war that was going on.

Eckley: The war was a disturbing element, although there were other things happening. That went away gradually in the early 1970's when the draft was ended by the ex-president of Lawrence University. He became the last director of the draft in the United States. He went with the Nixon administration in 1972. I was invited too but obviously I did not go.

Strauss: Why didn't you go?

Eckley I was more interested in what I was doing here.

Strauss: Okay. I talked to a few other alums and they said that, for the most part, there wasn't a whole lot of political activism on campus. Students were not necessarily politically minded or really concerned about that. I was just wondering what your impressions of how active they were?

Eckley: I think there were some that were fairly active. We had, for example, the group that went to the courthouse. I do not know what they expected to do there. But that was a group of about 200 out of a student population of a little over 1,600 at the time. So that gives you some idea of. We had the president of the student senate running around up in Grant Park during the 1968 Democratic Convention. There were a lot of problems, but no one was killed.! Also I remember one instance in which a student expected dispensation because of an off campus activity that did not have any relationship to his academic work. He thought he could get a grade without passing in a paper. It didn't work.

Strauss: Laughs. Okay. So I mean, how do you feel the relationship between the students and the faculty and the administration was when you were at Wesleyan? Do you feel like it was strong or was there some dissonance?

Eckley: Well, there was some dissonance but the relationship has always been fairly strong. Certainly the faculty interest the student growth is the kind of thing we wish to encourage. That's where the real activity is. That is why the students are here.

Strauss: Yeah. That's one of the nice things about this university for sure.

Eckley: I met with students on a frequent basis. We were together monthly for example. I typically knew about one hundred students or more each year. There was a respectable relationship. We never had any major difficulties. I can remember one instance in which a student expected dispensation because of some off campus activity that didn't have any relationship to his academic work. He thought he could get a grade without passing in a paper. It didn't work. It was not that kind of step-back-in-awe relationship that I remembered as a college student myself in terms of the university and its leading lights.

Strauss: Yeah, when you say that about your college life, can you explain.

Eckley: I went to college from 1939 to 1942. Then I did a Master's Degree. After my service in WWII, I went to Harvard. There is a much less formal relationship both on the part of the faculty and the students now.

Strauss: From what I've read in The Argus, it seems like one of your major focuses, at least early on, was kind of bringing students into this new ownership of the university, kind of really involving them and making sure they were responsible like the faculty, even going as far as letting them sit in on faculty meetings.

Eckley: They requested that and we instituted it. I invited them. I was pleased that at my inauguration all of the members of the Student Senate were robed up and attended.

Strauss: So, considering that Wesleyan looks like now and what it looked like when you were the president, I mean what are the most dramatic changes you see as far as maybe the physical scope of the campus.

Eckley: The faculty is somewhat expanded and I think significantly more capable. The campus obviously has been developed. We had a vigorous building program sponsored to a considerable extent by the federal government just before I came. We added on to the music building, added the art building, built a dormitory and the chapel and the beginning of the physical facility and were preparing to launch a new library effort. We had just moved into the library the year I came but it was sized pretty much to the faculty and student body at the time and needed attention. It is coming down now as we got into the new building in 2002.

Strauss: Yeah. So out of all the changes that Wesleyan has gone through, what stands out to you most, like what's the most radical change that you see.

Eckley: Proably the increased faculty capacity and therefore the appeal of the faculty to students. We attract a better quality student now so we are more balanced in that area. Not too much different in geographic spread, maybe slightly but not greatly significant.

Strauss: And now that you've been retired for some time, how involved are you still in the university?

Eckley I attend the Board of Trustee meetings, I still participate in one of the committees and am involved in the portfolio management class. I visit with faculty members and attend performances. After I left I was called back a couple of times. Once was to fill a sabbatical to relieve a person who was away. The next time was to teach for an ill person who did not return. I replaced him about halfway along and that was about as tough a teaching job as I ever had.

Strauss: Yeah that would be hard. So can you talk a little bit about what some of the traditions were like at Wesleyan when you were there, or maybe how homecoming was set up.

Eckley: I don't think that has changed much. We used to have a parade with our marching band and that was gradually phased out. We get more outstanding speakers and technology has enabled us to do things that we could not do earlier.

Strauss: Kind of a contentious issue on campuses across the country now is the Greek system. Can you speak about what it was like when you were here?

Eckley: I think we went through a change in the system. It was and is well established. We are pretty well balanced in terms of interest in various athletics without having an overwhelming concentration on any one. This was one advantage I saw about a liberal arts college. If a student came on an athletic scholarship it was possible for that student to quit and still have the scholarship. The Greek system is always a bit of a worry because it can get out of hand easily. The alums need to stay active and usually are more so with the women. We had our difficulties with a couple of Greek houses and that was a concern. For instance some houses started the recruiting too early. They were doing it as

soon as students came to the campus and we had to postpone that and say, "Look, they don't know what they are getting into".

Strauss: Any particular stories you would like to share about any of the issues you had?

Eckley: We had one fraternity house with a couple of fires. We had five fires on campus during my time. One was a fire in one of the dorms on Main Street. The most damaging was the fire in Presser Hall. But it was stopped in enough time so that the damage was fixable. Students were not involved. A man who had returned from active service accompanied by a couple of minors were responsible. This was the lowest time I think I felt when I was here. It happened the second year and I was out of town. My wife called and I was on an earlier plane returning the next day. It was traumatic because we had to basically move all of the activities that went on in Presser Hall. Fortunately we had just bought Franklin grade school that sat on the parking lot across from the president's house. All music activity was moved there for a year.

Strauss: That's an interesting story. So when you moved to Bloomington you had to move your family along with you, obviously.

Eckley: Right. We had four children from age 11 to 17. And they all went to college while we were here. Three of them took courses at Wesleyan in the summer. One joined a short term trip abroad. None of them attended Wesleyan.

Strauss: What was our reason for not letting them attend Wesleyan?

Eckley: That might have caused difficulty for both faculty and student. I knew a leading faculty member at the University of Kansas when I was there. He spoke of sending his son to the university and someone made it very unpleasant for him and the family. And I thought it would be much easier for them to go elsewhere. So much is learned when one goes away to college. As my wife says, they were in eleven colleges and universities in twelve years. All four of them had graduate work and summer school.

Strauss: I know that Wally is interviewing your wife right now. Just briefly what kind of role did she play in the university day-to-day affairs.

Eckley: She was obviously involved with the children, but she was the entertainer-in-chief. She became very interested in the beautification of the campus. We had lost about a hundred elm trees, so the campus looked bare. Also we had to close two streets. One ran right across the campus from Main Street to Park Street. And East Street was open (where it is closed at the Student Center) to where the science building is now. Those streets carried a lot of traffic and it took some effort to get them closed. Finally my wife organized a large group of interested and important people to show up at the City Council in support of the closing. That was our third try and the crowd made the difference.

Strauss: So a bunch of people rallied together and went to the meeting where just by sheer numbers they were convincing.

Eckley: Yes, it was impressive. Because of the closings we were able to get one of our alums who was a landscape architect from New York City to come and plan the new quad. She had been valedictorian of her class here and had done her graduate work at the University of Illinois and was working in New York City. She had also done work at Bard College. She came every summer for most of the time we were here and that is the reason it is planned so beautifully. She laid out the oval walks and started lots of different trees and shrubs native to Illinois. Every year she would check out the new plantings and plan for others. She and her husband always stayed with us in the president's home.

Strauss: Just being around Wesleyan now, does it feel like it has changed a lot or does it feel like it stayed the same?

Eckley: I think both statements would be true. I think a greater variety of students are here now and we have more international students. But that would be expected with a larger immigrant population. We were just getting started. We did not have enough minority faculty at the time. Of course we have a larger faculty. It was 125-126 when I was president and now it is over 150 and more diverse.

Strauss: On a kind of sensitive issue, did you see a lot of racial tension on campus or was that an issue at all.

Eckley: It was an issue in the sense that African American students who came here typically had not lived in communities where they had much experience with white students and vice-versa. There is more interchange now among all students. I remember some African Americans felt that they were not sufficiently represented in athletic teams or wondered why some plays were being produced. Also we probably had a larger number of small town students and as you know small towns now have smaller populations. So we are more heavily urban now. We are less Methodist than we were. Now some probably consider themselves agnostic or not interested in any particular religion. I tried to start a Catholic group and Jewish people shied away from church colleges more than now. I think we have a significant number of Jewish students.

Strauss: There is a Jewish organization on campus now.

Eckley: We did make an effort to get such a group started. We were using the local rabbi to teach a course in Old Testament. And we enticed the Catholic clergy to come in for the students.

Strauss: When I was reading some of The Argus issues, it seemed like over the years there has been a de-emphasis of religious morals or values.

Eckley: I suspect that is true.

Strauss: Considering the university's origins and affiliation with the church, just personally how do you feel about that?

Eckley: I think it is typical across the country in terms of the generational change that has occurred. In a sense, that is regrettable. The churches are weaker than they were and probably don't have the leadership or the funds to engage in as many activities as they once did. And they just don't have the facilities to do what they once did.

Strauss: But as far as the campus community goes, do you see a kind of negative change because we are less affiliated with Christianity?

Eckley: I can't evaluate that because I am not involved with students now.

Strauss: Okay. Just generally, are there any favorite stories or memories that you want to share about Wesleyan?

Eckley: I had a happy experience here. Obviously I stayed longer than any other president has, and we achieved improvement in the faculty and academic climate and were able to bolster the financial resources. And I am proud of the campus in terms of appearance. I feel a sense of satisfaction.

Strauss: So you feel like you accomplished the goals you set out to achieve?

Eckley: When you have a set of goals, not everything gets accomplished. I would have enjoyed seeing everything move faster. Many, many people participated during my tenure to help achieve the goals, and I owe a debt of gratitude to them. The university has continued to go in a positive direction despite the difficulties that higher education has had. We are a much stronger institution than when I came. President Wilson and his wife are doing a terrific job, and as I said before, and are totally dedicated to moving it forward.

Strauss: Well, I'm just out of questions. Is there anything you want to add to this interview?

Eckley: No, I think we have done a good job. You have done your homework..

Strauss: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

Eckley: Thank you.

Final copy Robert D. Eckley